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ABSTRACT

Selected passages from "Alice in Wonderland," seen as being analogous to the current state of the art of language instruction in American Schools, illustrate the decline of authority in the language classroom as a motivating force. Criticism is directed to the "bandwagon approach," which has led to the emergence of such terms as "program objectives," "instructional objectives," "accountability," "performance criteria," "criterion referenced evaluation," "cognitive domain," and "attitudinal domain." Changes in student attitudes are also noted and implications for language teachers are examined. Concluding remarks concerned with improving language teaching focus largely on the relative merits of individualized instruction. (RL)

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NEVADA NEWS

What Price Survival? or Are the Red Queen's Days Numbered?

> "I should see the garden far better," said Alice to herself, "if I could get to the top of that hill: and here's a path that leads straight to it - at least, no, it doesn't do that" - after going a few yards along the path, and turning several sharp corners -"but I suppose it will at last. But how curiously it twists! It's more like a corkscrew than a path! Well, this turn goes to the hill, I suppose - no, it doesn't! This goes straight back to the house! Well, then, I'll try it the other way!"

The foreign language teacher in 1972, after turning several sharp corners and twisting curiously, appears to have been following Alice through the looking-glass. And he seems also to have ended up straight back at the house, wondering which way to turn next.

The answer to our dilemma, I believe, does lie in the mirror, as I shall explain later. Meanwhile, let's explore the dilemma itself a bit more.

In the late 40's and early 50's, when I was training to be a teacher, every effort was made to make me a candidate for a severe case of schizophrenia.

In my methods classes I was served up something called "the direct method." One should learn by doing, and one should learn foreign languages by being constantly involved in the language itself. We also learned that students were all unique individuals.

In the foreign language classes themselves, not one teacher used the German language. We learned about the foreign language. Even in my phonology class I spent a whole semester transcribing German texts into the phonic alphabet in my notebook, instead of being actually involved in oral production of the language and its sounds. And we all did the same thing at the same time at the same rate for the same goals.

In the late 50's and early 60's the NDEA Institutes tried to narrow the gap between theory and actual practice. The method had arrived and had been blessed by Washington: the Glastonbury materials - later called A-LM. A new dogma was upon the scene. And there was not even a separation of church and state.

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Not only that, the church building itself, complete with pews, had been prescribed - the language laboratory. This was really to be the salvation of foreign language. If the teacher himself were inadequate or beyond salvation, the lab would do the job. Just strap the students in and turn on a whole world of native speakers and linguistic experts. Any teacher could be successful - just be able to turn on tape recorders and stand back.

Now, the labs seem to be rivaling European cathedrals in their actual use and relevance in the 70's.

And suddenly we also no longer have a state religion to assure that our churches stay full. We find ourselves in the position of the modern American church - we either attract members and converts through our own intrinsic worth and relevance to the congregation, or we perish.

May I suggest here that I think this is the healthiest fate that could have befallen foreign language education. I do not share the concern of those bewailing the removal of foreign language requirements across the land. I do not agree with all the money and energy being spent in appearances and lobbying before boards of regents, state legislatures, and federal bureaus to restore foreign language requirements or to prevent their removal. We in the profession must have precious little real faith in our cause if we must rely on captive congregations. And if our cause is really that hollow, the collapse will come with ever more violence the more we prolong it.

> "Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to walk from here?"
>
> "That depends a good deal on where you want to get to," said the cat.
>
> "I don't much care where," said Alice.
>
> "Then it doesn't matter which way you walk," said the cat.
>
> "...so long as I get somewhere," Alice added as an explanation.
>
> "Oh, you're sure to do that," said the cat, "if you only walk long enough."

Is our own dilemma a matter of not knowing where we want to go, or is it a matter of finding the right path to get there? Until recently we thought we were clear about the goals; we were looking for that magically right methodology for getting us there.

But the 70's find us being challenged from every direction. Our goals and objectives are called vague and meaningless. We are bombarded with terms such as <u>program objectives</u>, <u>instructional objectives</u>, <u>accountability</u>, <u>performance criteria</u>, <u>criterion referenced evaluation</u>, <u>cognitive domain</u>, and <u>attitudinal domain</u>.

And if we can ever define our goal, our Nirvana, we are told, like the Buddhists, that there are many paths for attaining it. The competing claims of audio-lingualism, direct method, grammar approach, structural analysis, generative grammar, individualized instruction, and any other "in" terms have reached the great accommodation in terminology. The new "in" term is "pluralism."

> "Who are you?" said the Caterpillar.
>
> This was not an encouraging opening for a conversation. Alice replied, rather shyly, "I...I hardly know, sir, just at present - at least I know who I <u>was</u> when I got up this morning, but I think I must have been changed several times since then."

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Have you ever read a great number of foreign language department goals or objectives or philosophies? What do statements such as "to foster international understanding," "to be able to communicate in the language," "to be able to read the foreign literature," "to know the four skills," "to attain near native pronounciation," etc. really mean? Are they specific, measurable? Even more important for our survival, are they relative to particular - or any - students?

When a student comes up to me breathlessly in October and blurts out "I'm going to enroll in German tomorrow!" and to my "So?" explains that she's a champion horsewoman and is going to get to go to the Olympics the following August, what do I do? Do I toss her a standard textbook, and do I answer her growing impatience and frustration with "You need to learn the four skills," or "Keep at it, you can read Faust in a few years," or "I can't let you go on until that uvular 'r' is perfected: why, they'll guess you're an American right away!"

What is the rationale for teaching the way I do as I stand or sit there conducting a class? What's really motivating me? Do I want to impress the principal with the control I have over the class if he should pop in? Do I want to have every student score over 700 on the college board tests? (And get rid of all those students who can't?) Do I want the University German Department to tell me, and others, how well my students do in German when they transfer there? And whatever I do, do I fall back proudly to the rationalization, "We have high standards to uphold in our classes here!"

I don't suppose we can help being involved in some kind of an ego trip, nor can we ignore job security, but is there not some way to get past the self and satisfy the ego through a more humane outlet? Does a type of ego satisfaction that may ultimately destroy us make any sense? Is it not the function of the ego to preserve the organism, and is it not perverse to maintain the ego on a path of self-destruction?

What "worked" in the past often takes on an aura of truth or gospel. We have pangs of guilt, fear of compromising so-called standards, if we move to meet the demands of the times. We like the security of believing in eternal truths, even if very few of them turn out to be eternal or very true. The tighter we have tied our ego to a particular dogma, the more difficult it is to wrench it free.

But imposing externally arranged objectives and standards on masses of students has seen its day. The accent is no longer on teaching in the old sense, with the student being a pliable, somewhat passive object to be molded according to some pre-conceived pattern.

Let us return to Alice.

> "The players all played at once, without waiting for turns, quarreling all the while, and fighting for the hedgehogs; and in a very short time the Queen was in a furious passion, and went stamping about, and shouting, "Off with his head!" or "Off with her head!" about once a minute.
>
> ++++++++++++++
>
> "They're dreadfully fond of beheading people here; the great wonder is, that there's anyone left alive!"
>
> ++++++++++++++
>
> "How do you like the Queen?" said the Cat in a low voice.
>
> "Not at all," said Alice; "she's so extremely..." Just then she noticed that the Queen was close behind her, listening; so she went on... "likely to win, that it's hardly worth while finishing the game."
>
> ++++++++++++++

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> Alice thought she might as well go back and see how the game was going on, as she heard the Queen's voice in the distance, screaming with passion. She had already heard her sentence three of the players to be executed for having missed their turns, and she did not like the look of things at all, as the game was in such confusion that she never knew whether it was her turn or not. So she went off in search of her hedgehog.

In the 1970's there are still those subjects who shake and quake at the passions of the Red Queen. There are those who welcome the security and recognition that come with submission to her authority. But their number is decreasing. And the number who wander off in search of their hedgehogs increases.

Even more alarming to us old Queens is the following trend observed in more and more students, that of rebellion rather than mere introversion:

> "Speak when you're spoken to!" the Queen sharply interrupted her.
>
> "But if everybody obeyed that rule," said Alice, who was always ready for a little argument, "and if you only spoke when you were spoken to, and the other person always waited for you to begin, you see, nobody would ever say anything, so that..."
>
> "Ridiculous!" cried the Queen. "Why, don't you see, child..." Here she broke off with a frown, and, after thinking for a minute, suddenly changed the subject of the conversation. "What do you mean by 'if you really are a Queen?' What right have you to call yourself so? You can't be a Queen, you know, till you've passed the proper examination..."

But the final challenge to Queensmanship and the signal that its days are numbered comes with the now growing ranks of Gryphons, who don't even take us seriously enough to feel the need to rebel:

> "What fun!" said the Gryphon, half to itself, half to Alice.
>
> "What is the fun?" said Alice.
>
> "Why, she," said the Gryphon. "It's all her fancy, that; they never execute nobody, you know. Come on!"

So here we stand. We long relied on mandated attendance to fill our classes. We could rely on a respect for our authority to assure that our goals and methods would be rarely challenged. We enjoyed a position of infallibility propped up, tenuously as it turned out, by extrinsic forces rather than having been supported by sufficient intrinsic value or truth or force.

They had to adjust to us, or be denied the benefits that our stamp of approval could bestow in terms of certificates and degrees and diplomas.

But suddenly the extrinsic props are being kicked away. And we are fearful that the edifice may indeed collapse. And in some places it has collapsed.

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But, happily, the picture painted above is and has not been universal. The supposed threat to our very existence has not caused panic in most of us. The spirit of self-preservation has brought about a time of introspection and also a period of outward search.

And if many of us have built our empire on the extrinsic forces described above, we find that this is not the case with many others. And as soon as the rationalizations have had their day and have served to soften the blow to the ego, we set about to see what we can learn from those who felt all along that the only valid way to attract students had to be based on a positive appeal of the foreign language program itself.

> "We had the best of education - in fact, we went to school every day."
>
> "I've been to day school, too," said Alice; "you needn't be so proud as all that."
>
> "With extras?" asked the Mock Turtle a little anxiously.
>
> "Yes," said Alice. "We learned French and music."
>
> "And washing?" said the Mock Turtle.
>
> "Certainly not!" said Alice indignantly.
>
> "Ah, then yours wasn't a really good school," said the Mock Turtle in a tone of great relief..."

So let's get down to the real issues. What's happening in those schools where foreign language remains a strong and important part of the curriculum, even though it is not required? Is there some magic pill we can discover? Have they come upon some new materials, a new method, a new machine? How has the crisis been avoided or averted or attacked in some areas?

> "How <u>can</u> you go on talking so quietly, head downward?" Alice asked, as she dragged him out by the feet, and laid him in a heap on the bank.
>
> The Knight looked surprised at the question. "What does it matter where my body happens to be?" he said. "My mind goes on working all the same. In fact, the more head downward I am, the more I keep inventing new things."

Saving foreign language instruction, if it is indeed in peril, probably does not really involve inventing new things. It involves sincere and determined employment of many things that have been around for a long time. It involves not only employing long unused processes, it involves the techniques needed in getting it all together.

We need to do more than teach about the humanities, we need to <u>be</u> humane and to involve the students in a process of humanity.

We need to do more than teach <u>about</u> responsibility; we need to <u>give</u> the students responsibility and let them exercise it and experience the consequences of such a process.

We need to face the issue of whether our grading system promotes or hinders learning.

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We need to pay more than lip service to the fact that students learn at different speeds in different ways and for different reasons.

We need to go much farther than merely acknowledging that literature is only one facet of a foreign culture.

We need to admit that our system of teaching and evaluating students is often designed to sift out an elite group rather than to develop the valuable potential of any student, even if he doesn't fit the mold of a very narrowly defined set of so-called standards.

And we need to have the courage to stare long and hard into the looking glass and try to know ourselves, to really face our motivations, rationalizations and whatever other defenses are preventing us from attaining the human potential of which we are capable.

But enough of generalities and an attempt at eloquent rhetoric. What does this mean in practical, real terms? What would a vital, relevant, humane foreign language program look like if we put together many of the elements of some of the thriving programs we have observed or been informed about?

May we be presumptuous and take the liberty to point out a goal toward which we feel concerned teachers might be directing themselves. It is not a utopia I want to present, but a realistic, attainable type of program.

And beware of thinking about what I'm saying as a Platonic ideal. It is this type of thinking in the past that has led too many of us into dogma, institutionalization, fossilization. For we are looking not for the perfect mechanical model, but rather for an imperfect organic process of continuous evaluation and renewal and change and growth.

And may we add that getting there needn't involve the trauma of immediate revolution, but rather a step by step process of evolution.

The physical facility that attracts students attempts to create a cultural island, be it in a traditional classroom or in a complex of rooms or in an open-space learning center. Every opportunity is taken to have as many cultural (small "c") materials on hand as students can see, touch, read, listen to, manipulate, and be otherwise involved with. Texts, tapes, slides, records, and other learning materials need to be readily and directly at hand, and in large variety. Provision needs to be made for individual study, for small group work and interaction, and for larger group presentations. But whatever is finally done within the physical limitations present, the end result should be a place where students like to come and stay and feel at home.

When at all possible, an instructional team should be formed to operate in this learning center. The talents and potentials of the individual instructors should be ascertained and utilized to maximum advantage. Instructors have as much individuality as students, and instructors should no more be pressed into a common mold than should students. In other words, we are asking for differentiated staffing.

Even in the very small department at any level there can be a team. This can consist of the classroom teacher and a cadre of student aides and assistants and advanced student tutors.

The educational team, however, consists also of the learner. And, of course, the learner is also an individual. The trend is toward eliminating the "we-they" forces in the learning process. A team works together toward a common goal. In the past there has

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been too much of a two-team concept, a game of opposing teams. By proposing a teaching-learning team with much of the polarity gone, we are not suggesting a non-teacher, the type, who, in some free schools, pretends to be on a par with students in his intellectual attainment and wisdom. This is a phony situation. We should no more deprive students of whatever the teachers know or have to offer than we should deprive them of whatever the students each have to offer one another. The process we want is one in which the emphasis is on learning, and where whatever human resources are available are marshalled as effectively as possible to facilitate this learning. This usually means that someone acts as a director or coordinator of the process.

The learning materials themselves must be varied. Even in most individualized programs currently, the material is exactly the same for every student. Only one dimension of individualization is accommodated - that of learning rate. Little or no concession is made to individual learning mode, individual interest for specific content, and individual goals and objectives for foreign language learning. Materials, if they are to serve also in attracting more students, must reflect these other dimensions.

If students are to stay with the foreign language program for longer periods of time, it appears of paramount importance that a means be present whereby they can be involved in real communication in that language. The average student feels that too much time is spent on the components of communication and not enough time is spent in actual communication. He feels like the football player who has memorized all the plays and perfected all the calisthenics and techniques, but never plays a game. The enthusiasm slowly wanes.

From the very beginning each newly acquired skill should be woven into a pattern of communication. Conversation groups of from two to six students should meet frequently - at least weekly - to employ and enjoy the skills being acquired. And students should be allowed to stay at one level until they feel secure before being pushed on - thus the appearance on the scene of ungraded, continuous progress programs; and thus the appearance of what we call "horizontal" courses of great variety at one level so that students can productively stay at a particular level as long as they choose instead of always being articulated vertically as soon as a text has been "covered."

As we said earlier, the program must be an organic process, not an unchanging Platonic ideal. Provision must be made for constant program evaluation and renewal in the light of current objectives, local needs, student reaction, resources available, teacher potentialities, community reaction, and end results. May I refer you to the report by Howard Altman of the "Conference on Individualizing Foreign Language Instruction" held at Stanford University in May, 1971 for more information in this vital area.

We have just begun to scratch the surface. A close look at the Live Oak High School (Morgan Hill, California) German program will show in detail how at least one school is attempting to employ all these concepts we have been talking about. The author of these words is at your service with more words and a comprehensive set of slides to show what can actually be done. Nice words and clichés are apt to remain just that, and not be translated into action, if it can't be demonstrated that such action is indeed possible.

However, in closing, let me caution once more that whatever a school or department or individual does in re-vitalizing a foreign language program, it must be done with the local scene and talent and objectives in mind. Know where you want to go and build your own program from there. You can't import every detail from someone else's program. You can plant a seed, but it is almost impossible to transplant an entire full-grown tree.

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Or, again, as Lewis Carroll said, "...Take care of the sense, and the sounds will take care of themselves."

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(First delivered as the Keynote Speech at the Washington Association of FL Teachers state conference, March 17, 1972, in Spokane.)